



Kansas National Guard: Thank you from a grateful state

On Aug. 27, our state celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Kansas National Guard. I was proud to take part in this celebration, and in the ceremonies the next day marking the deployment of 500 members of the Kansas National Guard to Iraq.

It is fitting that we both celebrate 150 years of honorable service and recognize the current risks undertaken by our husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, as they go off to serve their country.

The Guard has been there for us since 1855, and it's there for us today. In fact, the unit to be deployed - the Second Battalion, 137th Infantry - can trace its roots back to the Civil War.

From the Civil War to World Wars I and II, and on to Korea and Vietnam, Guard members have proudly represented Kansas strength and Kansas values around the world, as well coming to the aid of their neighbors in many disasters and crises at home.

And this continues today. With the new deployment, more than 2,000 Kansans will have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002. In Iraq, three members of the Kansas National Guard have made the ultimate sacrifice, and we must honor their lives in how we treat all the Guard families and every Guard member at every stage of their careers.

In particular, we need to make sure those issues most important to the lives of guardsmen and women - jobs, families, and health care - are effectively addressed. In this vein, we currently match military families with volunteer organizations and offer sustained help before, during, and after deployment through the Family Readiness Group.

Kansas has traditionally supported its citizen soldiers and airmen, and our state's leadership has continued in the post-9/11 era with a wide variety of efforts that ease the burdens on those who serve

I'm especially proud of the Kansas Military Bill of Rights, which provides common-sense responses to the immense stress of serving abroad. These include making sure state employees do not suffer financial loss when called to duty, that state universities offer in-state tuition for military family members, and that universities refund tuition payments when schooling is interrupted.

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We also must care for the families of soldiers who give their lives - make that profound sacrifice - in the service of our nation. National Guard members now receive reimbursement for \$250,000 in life insurance coverage, and the families of those killed in combat receive free tuition to any Regents college or university in Kansas.

From the 21,000 Kansans who served with the Guard in the Civil War to the entire state Guard contingent that was mobilized a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Kansas National Guard has selflessly protected our state and nation for 150 years.

Kansans should be rightfully proud of this history, and grateful that our neighbors have been willing to leave their families, disrupt their lives, and place their careers on hold. They deserve all our gratitude, and every ounce of our support.

So, this week, let us pause to celebrate the past service of all Guard personnel, while we wish - God speed - to those who will carry on the Guard tradition, far from home, in the months and years to come.